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SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2020

TAGS: PGOV PREL CE IN

SUBJECT: INDIAN MEA SHARES VIEWS ON SRI LANKA

Classified By: Political Counselor Uzra Zeya for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Indian MEA is optimistic that the January 26 elections will prove a step in the right direction for Sri Lanka. There is concern in the GOI that the international community's approach to addressing human rights concerns has pushed Sri Lanka toward China. India continues to watch developments in its island neighbor closely and to provide significant reconstruction assistance. The GOI welcomes the U.S. engagement in Sri Lanka. END SUMMARY.

The Upcoming Elections in Sri Lanka

12. (C) Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Joint Secretary for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives T.S. Tirumurthi told us the upcoming January 26 elections in Sri Lanka would mark Sri Lanka's entrance into a new phase of solving questions - such as the Tamil question - democratically. The GOI was confident that if the vote is closely divided it will motivate the victor to consider the views of the other camp. Sri Lanka must solve its internal problems, and the GOI sees these elections as a stepping stone toward a solution. A First Secretary at the Sri Lankan High Commission in New Delhi told us there had been much Indian interest in the upcoming election, with many journalists passing through the High Commission for a briefing en route to cover the unfolding events.

Role of the International Community in Sri Lanka

13. (C) Tirumurthi called on the international community to accept and work with the victor of the January 26 elections. He criticized the behavior of "the West" over the past year, opining that by "shunning" a victorious Sri Lanka over human rights issues, it had "pushed Sri Lanka into China's arms," and opened the region to the influence of China and Iran. The pattern of Chinese assistance to the needy northern areas of Sri Lanka would not uphold democratic ideals and human rights. Indian security, defense, and ethnicity-related interests are directly affected by Sri Lankan actions. In this regard, India welcomed U.S. engagement and saw the U.S. abstention on the IMF vote as a signal of a pragmatic approach.

Indian Assistance

¶4. (C) Though the GOI did not perceive the Chinese role as ill-intentioned, nor wish to counter it, Tirumurthi highlighted that India in December extended a \$425 million line of credit to Sri Lanka. This loan will reportedly fund three rail projects in the Northern Province, to be executed by a Union Government organization called IRCON International. Tirumurthi expressed disappointment that the loan had "gotten no attention" (Note: we found a single, one-line report in the December 22 edition of the Indian daily "The Hindu" announcing the loan, but as of January 22 we could find no direct reference to the loan on the MEA website). The Sri Lankan First Secretary told us that some of the rail projects were funded in part by the Chinese, so it would be "very embarrassing" if the Indians did not complete their section.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Tirumurthi's comment that the GOI is not trying to counter Chinese influence in Sri Lanka is to be taken with a grain of salt. Our contact at the Sri Lankan High Commission hit the bull's eye with his comment that India might be embarrassed if they could not match Chinese contributions to reconstruction. END COMMENT.

ROEMER